



More Than Just Fun and Games

By Lt. Ken Sanchez,
HSL-47

Certain moments define a sport—moments that, once encountered, keep you coming back for more. In the case of an off-road enthusiast, maybe it's the feeling that comes from exerting high-speed control over your vehicle in an otherwise out-of-control situation on a hot desert day. For the surfer, perhaps it's experiencing a beautiful set on a dawn patrol and enjoying it without competition. For the snow skier, maybe it's quietly making that first cut down a mountain slope in fresh snow and with perfect form.

These "moments" can border on the sacred, and they can define a life's passion.

My family's favorite pastime is camping and jet skiing along remote southern points of the Colorado River. The areas least trafficked often are the most prime. In the hard-to-reach courses of the river, among the narrow bends of water through heat-blasted rock and sand, you find numerous waterways and hidden lakes to explore. It's in

those remote locations, in the early morning or at sunset when the river flows dead clam, we find our "moment" again and again. Life becomes quite peaceful when you're skimming over glossy water at 60 mph on your personal watercraft (PWC). If you're a PWC owner, you know this feeling. It's what keeps you going back for more.

Those trips are the fuel to keep you slugging through a busy workweek. They remind us just how good it can get. We need those reminders not just for work but also for the day trips to overcrowded lakes and bays. Those long and remote trips are the best because they combine all the elements of a perfect vacation: location, relaxation and

family enjoyment of safe and exhilarating high-speed fun with minimum effort. Unfortunately, it's the high-speed fun of PWCs that has ruined many a family vacation—sometimes terminally.

Just 10 years ago, PWCs were new to the market and represented a minority of traffic on our national waterways. The first models were powered by inefficient 550 cc engines and were capable of maximum speeds around 35 mph. They were rather small in size, compared to boats, and safety incidents were low, given the tender age of the sport.

The popularity of PWCs has exploded since their introduction, and millions of them now ply our waterways. Today's PWC is powered by a fuel-injected, 1,498-cc-supercharged, four-stroke engine and can achieve speeds faster than 70 mph. To gain stability and to offer a sense of control at those high speeds, manufacturers have designed heavier PWCs with longer keels and wider hulls. The three-seater class available today approaches 8 feet in length, and, yet, you have the same sense of control at 70 mph as you once had at 35 mph, thanks to

technology. Exciting maneuverability and powerful acceleration sells, but, therein, lies the problem. While PWC popularity has grown, so has the frequency and severity of accidents related to the sport. High-impact speeds and no protection for the operator are a combination for disaster.

The group of friends my family travels with has experienced several accidents over the years, and those accidents have taught us the rules we follow today. We have seen a collision that could have been avoided if the operator had looked before he turned. That collision resulted in a broken pelvis. We also have seen two jet skis intentionally run aground, rather than crash into another craft at high speed. The "save" resulted in a broken rib and wrist. Finally, we've seen a friend hit a submerged sandbar at full speed. His jet ski stopped on a dime, launching him about 20 feet. He suffered a broken femur and lost his front teeth. For every injury, numerous near-misses have occurred. If you want to avoid these kinds of accidents, then take these tips from a veteran:

- Stay aware of your surroundings at all times. It's mandatory for vehicle operators to pass a skills test before obtaining a state driver's license. They also are required to obtain accident insurance before taking to the streets. Currently, no laws exist, directing owners of privately owned PWCs to pass a minimum skills test before operating a jet

ski. *[However, patrons renting PWCs from Navy Morale, Welfare and Recreation or Marine Corps Community Services facilities are required to pass a test and to have their skills evaluated.]* You are not required by law to show proof of insurance to buy or to register a PWC. In other words, you may

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be sharing the water with an uninsured Darwin candidate with 0.5 hours experience—one who is hellbent on impressing everyone else on the water with his toy's ability to do 70 mph. As we learn about life on the flight deck, it pays to keep your head on a swivel at all times. A quick reaction time and sure knowledge of your own PWC's capabilities can save you from imminent collision—or financial ruin.

- Wear proper protective equipment. An ATV rider has the common sense to wear a helmet, goggles, chest protector, gloves, and boots designed for the extremes of the sport. A PWC operator only is required to wear a life vest. If you're in a heavily congested location, consider using goggles and an approved helmet, too—your life may depend on it.

- Never drink while operating your PWC; this rule will save your life. If you choose to drink, do





The author (center) enjoys an outing with a couple of his friends.

so after your day on the water is done. Water-sport vacation hotspots are party spots as well, so you can count on a percentage of boat and PWC operators to be under the influence to varying degrees. Don't depend on the other guy to see you and to react first or correctly. You're in control of your own life on the water, so it's in your best interests to stay sober and aware enough to avoid the high-speed jet skis driven by alcohol-fueled riders. Split-second reaction time on the water means everything.

- Learn how to operate your PWC skillfully. Take time to practice emergency turns. Push your balance to the limit, practicing extreme body English. Learn how to quickly climb aboard your PWC from the water. This skill comes in handy when you fall off and need to get out of the way because someone is bearing down on you at high speed.

- Never allow a new rider to operate your PWC without a thorough safety brief and some basic-skills training. Otherwise, you literally risk the life of your inexperienced buddy. Take time to discuss the safest areas to ride when crowding is an issue. Buddy up with him if you're not sure about his ability to ride safely in traffic. Discuss the plan you'll follow if your jet ski becomes disabled. Make sure your friend knows where the fire extinguisher is and how to operate it.

- Clearly signal your intentions to others. There are established rules of the waterways designed to guide traffic flow safely. The reality is that, on crowded weekends, the masses completely ignore these rules, and the results can be chaotic. Whenever you doubt what direction someone is going, take control of the situation by signaling your intentions with your arms or hands. Never make a sharp turn in any direction without first looking to see if the path is clear.

- Do a thorough operational check of your jet ski **before** placing it in the water. Don't plan this check for the trip from the boat ramp to the campsite. Pay particular attention to the throttle, steering linkage, and ignition-kill system. Make sure you hand-tighten the drain plug **before** you put your jet ski in the water.

Perhaps you're saying these seven common-sense tips make it sound like you'll be spending all your time being safe, instead of enjoying the sport, but you're wrong. Ride a PWC once, and you'll be hooked. It's a thrill of power and handling, with no parallel. However, you must respect the jet ski if you want to live. As you develop your riding skills, they start becoming second nature, and, before you know it, you're wondering why everyone else can't share the same common sense about riding PWCs safely. **S**